



THE BLIND BROOM-MAKER OF BARNSTABLE.

## "BUY A BROOM! BUY A BROOM!"

BY AMANDA B. HARRIS.



**L**AST summer while on our vacation trip along the sea-coast we made our plans so as to stop over a train at Barnstable that we might have time to take a look at that ancient burgh, but found to our dismay when it was too late, that of time we had altogether too much, for when we stepped out of the car it was seven o'clock in the morning, and our train would not leave till four in the afternoon! And to make matters worse it began to rain. We managed, however, at intervals when the rain held up, to get a pretty good idea of the place, but were driven back to the station by the persistent drizzle long before noon; and there we seemed destined to spend five tedious hours, with not much of anything to do, except to get the way-bills of the Old Colony Railroad by heart, and commit to memory whatever might be available in the other advertisements posted on the walls.

We were beginning to be desperate, when my companion, strolling about, discovered a small placard saying that fruit was for sale in the freight depot. I set out to explore, having visions of apples and pears, but especially peaches and grapes before me.

Passing the wide freightage doors, I came to a narrow one which was wide open; so I first looked, and then walked in. It was an unfinished place where a slim young woman was busy about her housework, while a sick-looking man was "standing round." There was a cooking-stove, and she was taking pies out of the oven, which she set in a row on a cumbrous wooden bench that filled all the opposite end of the room, and under it were stored bunches of something unknown to me which I found afterwards was broom-corn. She was pretty and girlish, and had blue eyes, and fair hair.

She asked me to sit down, and told me they had been living there off and on for three years. "We used to live in 'Commons,' but we did not like, and so came up here. My husband is not well, and I go out washing, and take in washing."

It was a very queer place to live in, but neat and



comfortable, yet it seemed just as if they might have been moving, and had merely stopped here over night and set up their stove in order to cook something to eat.

Upon inquiring for the fruit, about which it began to seem as if there must be either a mistake or a mystery for nothing of the kind was to be seen except the dish of apples left over from the pies, she directed me up-stairs; and up the steep narrow stairs I went, nearly stumbling over a great black dog (which she assured me would not bite) that lay stretched at the threshold of a dreary kind of room which had one occupant—a man with his shirt-sleeves rolled up to the elbows at work near one of the windows at the farther end. And now I remembered that we had seen him at his bench there as we sat in the depot, and wondered what he was doing.

No indications of fruit; but there were four ma-

confectionery; peanuts, dates and figs. So as there were no apples, no pears, no peaches, no grapes,



A GAY CAVALCADE.



FROM DR. FRANKLIN'S BROOM-CORN SEED.

chines and a stack of brooms, and the litter of shreds and waste, and I was about to retreat with an apology after making known my errand. He said I had made no mistake, but he was out of everything except

after all my perseverance, *dates* I would have, and he went to a closet where he said he kept them, holding his hands out before him in such a way that I knew he could not see even before he said, "I am blind."

After he had weighed them and received his pay, there were a few words about his business, which he seemed delighted to talk about, and because I put a question or two, he asked if I was a reporter, and said "that used to be my business. I was on the reportorial staff of the Pennsylvania legislature, when from overtasking my eyes, and other causes, I became blind. I went to the Institution at South Boston, and learned to make brooms so that I could earn my living."

He was full of interest in the work he had been compelled to fall back upon, and invited me to come in with my companion and see how it was done.

"Now I wish," said he, "that I had some stuff ready. I have to soak it before I use it. But your train does not go till four o'clock. I will put some



to soak immediately, and if you will come in about three I will begin at the beginning and make a



THE TRAGEDY OF BROOMS — THE CROSSING SWEEPER.

broom, and you can then see the whole process."

To be sure we were glad to go, and he did as he said he would, and explained every particular, even to the cost.

"The broom-corn comes from the West," he said, "though a good deal grows in the Mohawk valley, and the largest broom establishment in the United States is at Schenectady.

"It often grows, if thriving stalks, ten or twelve feet tall; it can be cultivated here, but not so profitably. It comes in large bales, weighing anywhere from one hundred and fifty to five hundred pounds. Where I buy mine in Boston it costs me six cents a pound, though the price varies.

"I sort it out on a 'sorting bench,' first, for if I took it as it is, the brooms would be of queer qualities. Sorting is a regular trade to learn.

"The next thing I tie it in bundles, and then it is ready for use. I put as many of these to soak the night before, as I want to make up in the day. I leave it in the water half an hour, then let it drain,

and it keeps damp enough for working; if it was dry it would break when I sew it. Here you see this lot, from which I shall make the broom. I call it 'stock' and when it is all prepared, I keep it on here; this is a 'stock bench' or 'rack,'" pointing to the wooden frame which filled the space between the two windows.

"You see I have three machines besides my cutter — the stock-frame, the winding-machine and the press. They were made at Schenectady, and they cost seventy-five dollars. You see one needs capital even to make brooms, but some friends helped me to get started. My cutter I will tell you about



THE COMEDY OF BROOMS — MAMMA'S LITTLE HOUSEMAID.

by-and-by as I come to use it.

"Now I am ready for the handle. These come a hundred in a bundle, and are made of the best



spruce—these are from Maine—and each has a hole where the broom is put on. Now this is what I do first."

Here he secured the handle into a vise belonging to the winding-machine which was just high enough for him to stand at and work comfortably without stooping, and had also connected with it the "rag-wheel" from which the wire was unwound by a few

broom, which is the best. (The 'hurl' is the finest part of the corn, the heart.) I make five sizes: number six is the smallest, and it is the smallest manufactured in this country. I can make twenty of those in a day. Of the number ten, the hurl, I have made twelve, and they sell for forty cents apiece. Sometimes when I have got a lot of brooms on hand I hire a horse and cart, take a boy with me,



UP IN THE ATTIC.

rotations of a wheel below, while at the same time it was wound taut around the broom.

"They formerly used twine," he said, "but there were objections to it, as you will readily see, and now we have wire, and it is galvanized to prevent it from rusting. It costs me twelve cents a pound; it used to cost seventeen."

Having made the handle fast, he took a bunch of the corn, smoothed it carefully through his hands to even it, laid it against the handle, put his foot on the treadle or whatever the hour-glass shaped piece of mechanism might be named, and with one or two revolutions wired it tight. This lot had the butts left on, but from the next layer he sliced them down wedge-fashion with a very sharp knife, having secured them to those already on by a strap which could be fastened at such length as he chose by means of a leather button; another and another tier, each time of choicer quality, succeeded, and so on till the stock for that broom was used up.

"This," he explained, "is a number eight broom. If there had been time I would have made a *hurl*

and go round the country to sell them; and people will object to paying my prices, and I can't always make them believe that it pays to buy a good article, even if it is a broom. They sometimes say that they can get enough of them at fourteen cents, but I tell them when they pay fourteen cents for a broom, they only get a fourteen-cent broom."

He had now a rough broom, which he released from the vise and took over to the press which had three pairs of cruel-looking irons that he said were "the jaws," of sizes to shut round brooms of three different thicknesses and hold firmly, while he did the next thing, which he made known in this wise:

"Now I shall sew it. The number six have only two sewings—all they need, they are so thin. The others have three. They are all sewed with waxed linen twine: the higher sizes have pink, because it looks better; the others have tow-colored. You see my needle? It is some like a sail-maker's, but not exactly. I have two, though one will last a life-time. I keep them in this oiled rag to prevent them from rusting. They cost fifty cents apiece, and were made



of the very best of steel. See what nice metal it is!" He held out one, shaped more like a paddle than anything else, polished to the last degree, and as lustrous as silver; then he threw it on the floor to show us how it would ring.

"Broom tools of all kinds are made at Schenectady, but my needles, knives and combs come from



"PLANT THE BROOM!"

Hadley. I will show you the combs pretty soon; the knives you have already seen. Let me see — where did I lay that other needle? No, you need not look for it; I must find it myself. I have to be careful where I leave my things, so that I can put my hand on them the moment I want them. Oh, here

it is," picking it up with his long supple fingers, and rolling it securely up in the oiled cloth.

"Now you notice I put on this *palm*," and he held up what looked like a mitt just large enough to cover the palm of the hand and the wrist, having a hole to slip the thumb through and leaving that and the fingers free. It was made of cowhide, and sewed together on the back, while in the inside was set a thimble against which the needle was to be pressed in doing the hard sewing, while the leather protected the skin from being fretted by the broom.

"It is not just like a sail-maker's palm," he added. "I have one of those which a man gave me, and I will show it to you." So going again to his dark closet, he groped for it among his multifarious things, and came back with one similar, except that it was of raw-hide, and the thimble was a little projection looking like a pig's toe.

He sewed the broom through and through, producing the three pink rows. Then he said he would comb it to clear away the loose and broken stems; and so he passed through it a sort of hetchel made of thirty small knife-blades set in a frame, "which cost me," said he, "more than you would think — that comb was five dollars; and now I comb it out with this one to remove the small stuff and the seeds." And releasing it from the clamp, he took down a fine comb from a nail, and repeated the process.

"And now it is ready to be trimmed. I lay it on this hay-cutter, which some friends bought cheap for me at a fair, and answered my purpose after a few alterations, and I trim it off, nice and even at one end — and now it is done. You have seen a broom made."

That was true. Our only regret was that we could not have that same broom to take away; but on our zig-zag journey, when we were likely enough to stop over or turn off anywhere, that was an absurdity not to be thought of. We did, however, "buy a broom" that we *could* take — and an excellent one it proved — and we accepted a small package of broom-corn seed which the blind workman was anxious we should have, "to plant in some spare spot just to see how it looks when growing."

When we went down-stairs, the woman was out on the platform, her yellow hair tossing about in the wind, and she seemed as happy with her meagre accommodations in the freight house as if she were



owner of a mansion. She begged us to go in and get some of her apples, we were welcome, and "they did not cost me anything," she added. She told us more about her fellow-tenant, and said he paid half the rent, "and he used to board with us, but now he boards up in town, and he goes back and forth alone, his self."

This curious and pleasant little episode made us so ready to be interested in everything pertaining to brooms that it seemed a kind of sarcasm of circumstances when, at a junction not very far along our route, we saw, perched upon his cart, a pedler doing his best to sell his brooms to the crowd on their way home from one of the Cape camp-meetings. His words were just audible as the train went on:

"Buy a broom! Buy a broom! Here's the place to buy a cheap broom, for *fourteen* cents! *only* fourteen cents! A broom for fourteen cents! So CHEAP!"

And it happened not many days later that somebody read in our hearing that the broom-corn is a native of India, and that Dr. Franklin was the means of introducing it into this country; from seeing a whisk of it in the hands of a lady he began to examine it—being of an inquiring mind, as everybody knows—and found a seed, which he planted.

The street-sweeper's broom is the genuine *besom*, made of birch stems, cut out in the country, and brought into town tied up in bundles like fagots; suitable enough for those stalwart men who drag

them along so leisurely, but burdensome for the hands of the wretched little waifs, who, tattered and unkempt, make a pretence of keeping the crossings clean; who first sweep, and then hold out a small palm for the penny, dodging the horses' hoofs, and just escaping by a hair's breadth the wheels of truck or omnibus in their attempts to secure the coin, if some pitiful passer-by stops at the piping call:

"Please ma'am, a penny!"

That is the almost tragic prose of brooms.

But there is a bit of poetic history that ought not to be forgotten, for it was a sprig of the lovely broom bush—call it by the daintier name of heath if you will—such as in some of its varieties grows wild in nearly every country in Europe, a tough little flowering evergreen, symbol of humility, which was once embroidered on the robes, worn in the helmet, and sculptured on the effigies of a royal house of England. Which of the stories of its origin is true, perhaps no one at this distant day can determine; but whether a penitent pilgrim of the family was scourged by twigs of it—the *plantagenesta*—or a gallant hunter plucked a spray of it and put in his helmet, it is certain that the humble plant gave the stately name of "Plantagenet" to twelve sovereigns of that kingdom; and their battle-cry—which meant to them conquest and dominion, but has a very practical sound to us, and a specially prosaic meaning to one like the blind broom-maker of this simple story—was this:

"*Plant the broom! Plant the broom!*"

## IN THE EARLY MORNING.

BY ADELAIDE G. WATERS.

THE sea of whispering tasselled corn  
Sways and widens from side to side;  
Far as a light-house over the wave,  
The farm-house looks on this bending tide;  
Drenched, and cob-webbed with diamonds, fall  
Blackberry vines across the wall.

Through blur and smoke from the passing train,  
The sleepy passengers hardly see  
The cow-boy stop and wave his cap,

As he shouts right merrily;  
Nor mark the watching girl let fall  
Her half-filled pail by the blackberry wall.

She lifts her hat from her gypsy eyes,  
A wild rose falling from out her hair;  
She sends with the train a fleeting wish  
To see for herself if the world is fair—  
To go off now in the morning dew,  
And travel, travel, the whole world through!